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By Christopher Hanson

WASHINGTON

A highly secret U.S. intelligence unit has routinely spied on official British Government communications between London and Washington, according to an unpublished congressional report.

The report says U.S. electronic eavesdropping on its close ally was apparently part of a large operation by the National Security Agency (NSA) to intercept the high frequency communications of several governments, including friendly ones.

A spokesman for the supersecret NSA declined to comment on the report, which Reuters obtained from private sources.

Congressional sources said the report was prepared for a House Government Operations subcommittee in late 1977 but was deemed too controversial to be made public.

It quotes a former employee of the Army Security Agency (ASA), a branch of NSA, who was based at Vint Hill Farms, a telecommunications receiving station near Washington:

"We had a whole bank of machines (and) I was one of a whole team of men whose only job was to read and process intercepted British communications."

The Vint Hill station, a 700-acre site in the Virginia countryside 35 miles southwest of Washington, is still operational and bristles with hundreds of antennas, which are visible from a public road.

An armed guard manning the gate earlier this week let military traffic through and turned a curious journalist away.

David Watters, a former telecommunications specialist for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), told Reuters he had been inside the complex within the past two years and had seen a number of the "rhombic" antennas, which he said are almost certainly used to spy on embassy communications.

Vint Hill apparently is only one of many examples of the United States spying on allies as well as adversaries.

The unpublished congressional report quotes former U-2 spy plane pilot Francis Gary Powers, who was downed over the Soviet Union in 1959, as admitting he had flown spying missions against U.S. allies as well.

Former CIA official Victor Marchetti told Reuters he had personal knowledge of full-scale U.S. spying against a staunch ally, South Korea.

"Obviously, you need to keep a very close eye on them, not only in Korea but here and everywhere else (using) a wide range of techniques," Marchetti said, adding:

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